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ABSTRACT

The 12 articles in this publication contain information designed to help parents of preschool and elementary school children understand the complex psychological and sociological process of language development and its relationship to learning to read. The articles also provide specific suggestions for parents who wish to participate in their child's reading development. The articles discuss the following subjects: (1) getting ready to read; (2) kindergarten--an important prereading step; (3) reading and language development in first grade; (4) creating a good reading climate at home; (5) reading games to play at home; (6) reducing psychological pressures in learning to read; (7) adults as reading models; (8) vision, hearing, coordination, and health in reading; (9) what parents should know about reading readiness; (10) reading outside of school; (11) information for parents on reading instruction methods; and (12) what communities can do to improve reading programs. (HTH)

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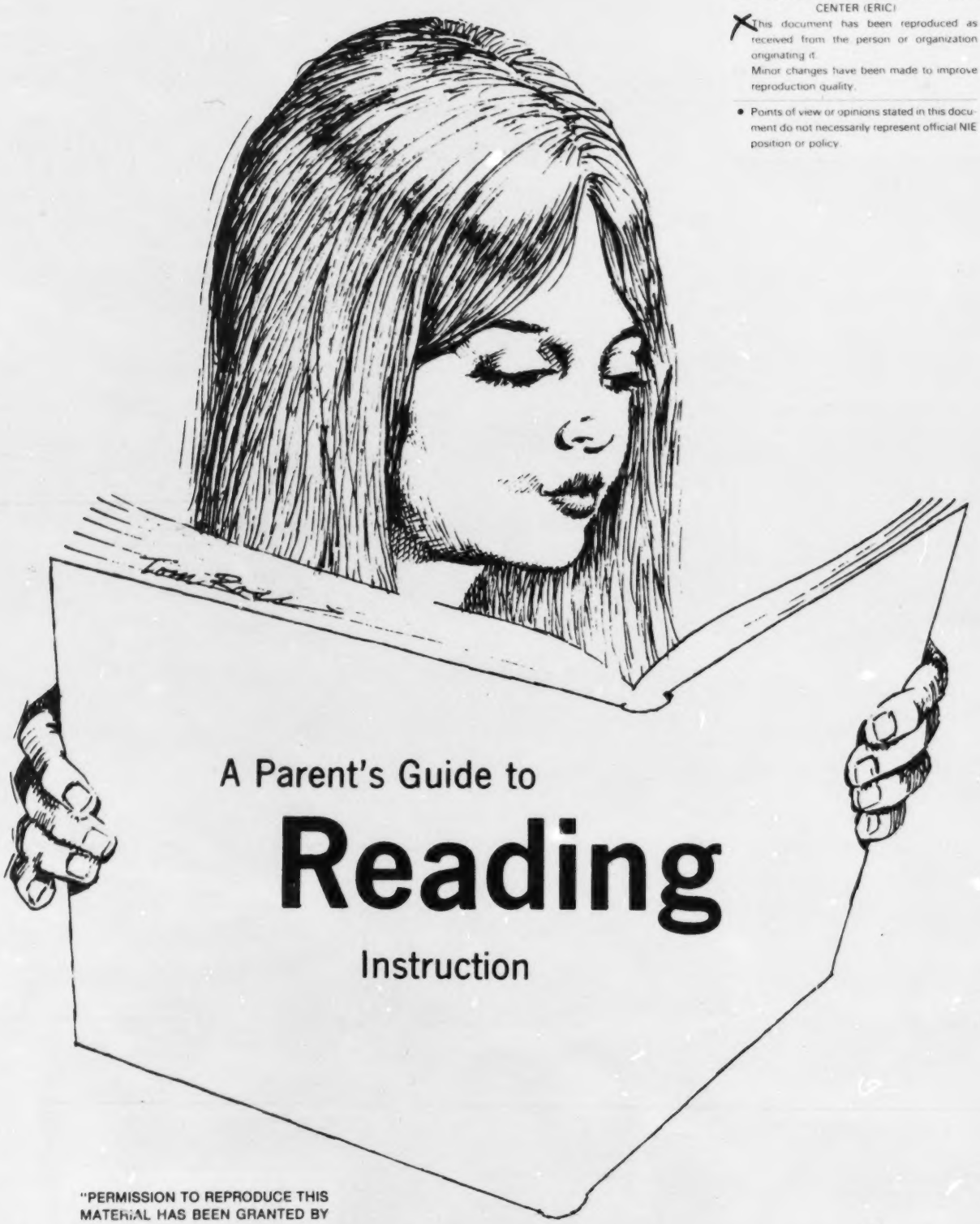

A Parent's Guide to

Reading

Instruction

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INTRODUCTION

The twelve articles presented in this publication contain information for the parents of preschool and elementary school children. The purpose of this publication is to help parents to understand the process of language development and its relationship to learning to read. The content of these articles provide specific suggestions for parents who wish to participate in their child's education.

Learning to read is a complex psychological and sociological process involving both the home and the school. The home experiences of children provide the foundation for school experiences. Educators are trying to modify the school environment in such a way that all children have an equal opportunity to learn. The home environment can also be modified to this end. Schools and parents must work together to develop an optimum home-school environment for young learners. The ideas presented in these articles may help to instigate such a partnership.

This series includes articles written for the National Reading Center by specialists in reading and early childhood education. Originally printed as newspaper articles, the series was edited by Virginia H. Mathews, director of the National Book Committee.

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Getting Ready to Read

Kindergarten! What an adventure for a five- or six-year-old. It is a time of anticipation, curiosity, a little anxiety, and usually a great deal of enthusiasm. Very often kindergarten is the first school experience children have. If it is a good one it will probably affect their whole school experience favorably.

Your role as a parent changes as a child moves from the home to a school situation. No longer will you be immediately available to comfort bruises, to sense when your child is tired or has hurt feelings or enough of a certain activity. A parent must learn to be a supporter -- someone who sets up home life so it will complement what is going on in school.

For instance, if your child needs to be alone, away from people from time to time, you can provide for this when the child comes home from school. School doesn't allow much private time. Home can. Some habits may need to be altered. You may need to substitute an earlier bedtime for the afternoon nap.

You don't need to tell your child to "Mind the teacher!" Children who go along with things at home, probably will do the same thing at school. Don't set the teacher up as some kind of a policeman, or stress the idea of discipline. Emphasize the idea that school is a place to explore, be curious, find out about things, rather than an institute for obedience training.

Many of the new activities are designed to prepare children for learning to read. Try to help your child begin to do things now that will have to be done in school and may not have had to be done at home. Sometimes the child will have to follow directions carefully and quickly. If that is hard for your child, you can help through a little practice at home. Also in kindergarten, children have to do a lot of waiting and taking turns. You might help prepare for this at home: when a child asks for help with something, wait a few minutes until you finish what you are doing. You can use this opportunity to point out that in school there will be one teacher and many children and often the teacher will not be able to get to him or her immediately.

You can also help your child learn to be quiet and listen from time to time. For a lively five-year-old this can be the most difficult thing of all. You can help by reading stories and asking your child to sit quietly, to listen, to wait, to follow directions. Recognize that these are hard things for a small boy or girl to do and be supportive of any attempts to do it.

Your own attitude to your child's going to school will have a great deal to do with how the child feels about school and adjusts to it. Children are very sensitive to their parents' moods and feelings. If you approach your child's going to school with anxiety -- "Will he or she have friends? Will the teacher be good? Will he or she get hurt on the playground?" -- children are sure to pick this up and start asking

their version of the same questions. If, on the other hand, you have confidence in your child and see school as a new and exciting opportunity, the child will pick up this sense of positive excitement too and will be all the better prepared for opening day.

Going to kindergarten is an excellent time for a parent to build bridges between the young child and older brothers and sisters. This is a time when a "good" big brother feeling can be encouraged. Some older brothers and sisters may need help in seeing that it's not just the "baby going to baby kindergarten," but, rather, "now little brother or sister is going to school too." Big brothers or sisters can increase their own sense of competence by helping your younger child learn the ropes at school.

A parent also should be willing to hear it all in the beginning, the good and the bad, no matter how dull, particularly as your child begins the school year and makes those first efforts in reading. By spinning their tales, children learn to use language better and begin to find out what is interesting to adults and what is not. A parent who presents an attentive ear will be able to encourage this important avenue of communication and foundation for reading.

This does not mean simply listening to words. You know your child better than anyone else. You know the signals of tiredness, even if it is vigorously denied: You know when something is troubling your child, even if he or she says it is nothing. You should be able to listen for them and then provide support at home so that you, your child and school are in balance. By maintaining this balance, you will help to create a climate favorable to learning -- one in which your child will develop good attitudes toward school, reading, and the other skills that must be mastered; and one in which you will be aware of the child's difficulties and successes, strengths and weaknesses, in order to provide the necessary help and support.

Kindergarten -- An Important Prereading Step

Many reading skills are started in kindergarten, although children and parents usually don't think so. Long before your child even learns the alphabet or begins to put letters together to form words he or she will be building a foundation in language.

A kindergarten classroom often looks like a well-equipped playroom, but many kindergarten activities are learning in disguise. Reading preparation skills are being developed every day.

When children are painting at an easel, for example, they are discovering the fact of differences for themselves. They learn how to mix the colors so that they become lighter, darker, or lighter again. They learn that they can make a skinny line or a fat one. Shapes and symbols on paper are fun for them.

As they paint, they create shapes, their own shapes. Here they can begin to learn something about forming symbols. The ABC's are the symbols they soon will use in reading, but probably will have more meaning for children if they have had many opportunities to create picture symbols.

At the same time, children have a kind of writing experience. They may not be writing words, but they are experiencing what it is to express themselves on paper.

A simple jigsaw puzzle also will teach children something about their abilities. Again they are learning the difference between shapes as they fit the pieces together. The puzzle is self-testing -- they can tell for themselves when it is done correctly and can move on to a more difficult puzzle when they feel ready. Because they are not performing for anyone but themselves, they may gain some self-confidence and not be afraid to experiment.

Kindergarten play-acting presents a wonderful opportunity for vocabulary building. A little boy or girl dressing up as a doctor will certainly want to use a stethoscope to make a diagnosis. The child will be eager for the teacher to introduce words a real doctor would use, and will learn to use them in acting out the part. In playing the role, the child is getting practice in using new words and is learning how new words can be applied to a variety of situations.

Very important too are the make-believe words a child creates. The imitation of a rumbling mountain-slide or the whoosh of a jet plane help the child to manipulate sounds. This helps the child with phonics later. Play becomes reading in disguise as children discover new sounds.

A trained kindergarten teacher will take advantage of the young child's love of sounds to teach something about them. Children will learn the nursery rhymes and poems their teacher reads to them, not because anyone asks them to, but because it is fun to feel the words rolling off their tongues in such a bouncing rhythm.

Singing is fun, too. And it is also learning. Boys and girls who don't speak much usually forget their shyness and join in group songs happily. Those who talk incessantly enjoy the discipline of using words in rhythm. Both are increasing their vocabularies and their knowledge of how words sound.

Then, of course, there is story-time. As pages turn, a child associates an idea with a picture and understands that pictures represent real objects. Soon a child will learn that words too can represent real objects, as well as ideas.

A child may become so familiar with the words of a favorite story that he or she will be able to say them as the pages are turned. Although the child doesn't know what each word is, he or she knows that what is on the page does say exactly what the child is saying. This recognition that letters on a page say something, and that they say exactly the same thing each time they are used, is an important step in learning to read.

In each of these ways and many others, your child is building reading skills. Most important of all, the child is finding out that learning can be fun.

Reading and Language Development in First Grade

The ability to read does not suddenly happen when your child enters the first grade. Many different kinds of learning and a great deal of practice must take place before reading becomes easy for children. You can do much to help in a child's first half-year of school.

To become a successful reader, your child must learn how to listen and speak. The teacher will encourage a child to develop these skills. Children will hear and respond to sounds in the classroom and on the playground. They will probably listen to records and follow the directions which may tell them to hop, skip, jump, form a circle, sit in a row, or any number of things.

Others will listen while he or she speaks. Children will name objects in the school room. They will share experiences with other children about pets, walks to school, or school work.

During the first few weeks of school you may be able to help your child with language development by listening to the descriptions of what happened at school, by listening to stories he or she makes up, by talking with your child about the things seen and heard, and by reading stories to the children and answering their questions.

A first-grader needs to be able to hear all of the sounds language uses, and the teacher has many ways of making these sound familiar to children. The teacher will read stories and poems, and will encourage the children to use rhymes and jingles in the classroom and on the playground. The teacher may ask your child to finish lines with words that rhyme or sound the same in order to teach the idea of words that sound alike. At home you might help your child with sound awareness by saying, "I see something that sounds like ball starts. What do you see that starts like ball?" A balloon, a book? You might also ask children to bring you a number of things in the room which start with the same sounds, such as pan, pen, pencil, paper, etc. These and other similar games will help children develop sound awareness.

From the words that sound alike, the teacher will give your child words that look alike or look different. Your child will move naturally into this task if the proper readiness for it has been made. The child will learn to sort objects, animals, etc. into common groups by pictures, words and printed symbols. And will discover the likenesses and differences in these objects such as color, kinds and sizes. These experiences will help children understand the word families, such as name, tame, game, same, etc.

The teacher will have the children match words that look alike. You may want to try this at home with letters, words, or groups of words that you have cut from the newspaper. They can be matched by placing them on a table or by pasting them in rows on paper. Headlines rather than small type are best for this.

Children also will be taught several skills which help them to figure out new words by themselves. These skills are called word recognition skills and are: sounding out words (phonics), noticing the way a word is put together (word structure), and being able to use the meaning clues in the story.

First grade children learn phonics by learning letter sounds singly and in groups. In order for them to use phonics, they must be able to hear the differences in sounds and see the differences in printed words. Once they have mastered phonics they will be able to recognize words that start the same, such as take, tall, and Tom, and words that end the same, such as head, read, and word.

Word structure is the study of the parts of a word and what they mean. This skill will help your child from the first grade on and will be expanded every year. It means learning the difference between root words and their added parts. This will help children read words like help (the root word), helped, helps, helping, and helpful. They will learn to join two words together to make one word, such as today, doghouse, and backyard. They will read words like can't, let's, I'm, and other contractions.

Their first lessons in reading stories or articles will probably be in preprimers. These are usually paperback books containing many pictures and few printed words. The sentences will be simple but meaningful. In these books, your child will learn to read to get the main ideas or notice important details, to understand the order in which something happened, or to decide what made it happen. Children may be able to read and summarize the story or article. These are the same reading skills they will need for studying all through school.

At home, you can help by having your first grader practice reading aloud to you. Many children's books are available at public libraries and in stores. This is not too early to have your child begin a small library of books. Or, your child can tell you a story as you print the words on paper for him or her to read back to you. Children might enjoy drawing pictures that would help tell the story. Your interest in hearing your child read will be a most important help in his or her growing in reading ability.

Children do not all learn at the same rate or in the same ways, but once children have developed these abilities, they will be reading short, simple sentences. They will have a good start in reading.

Creating a Good Reading Climate at Home

Now that you have sent your first-grader off to school, you may be thinking that at last you can relax. Now it's time for the teacher to take over. Not so! There are many things you can be doing to reinforce and follow up what your child learns in school.

A good starting point for learning how to help your first-grader is for you to find out what is expected in school. Talk with your child's teacher about what's involved in teaching reading. The teacher will be glad to have your help with your child at home. You might also ask your librarian for informative books and articles on what goes into learning to read.

Learning to read is the first major task your child will face in school. You can help by showing your interest in what the class is doing. Be willing to listen to your child's early reading efforts with patience and enthusiasm. By being a good listener you will give the child the opportunity to try, to practice, to know what he or she is reading.

If your child asks you to pronounce a word, do it. Read to your child if he or she asks. Don't hesitate to help your child in saying and writing the alphabet if he or she shows that this is what is wanted. Offer encouragement, but don't push. Let your child decide what he or she would like help with.

It is important to avoid pressuring your child. Experts stress the importance of a relaxed, tension-free atmosphere for the learner. They also emphasize that there is no one way, no sure-fire method of teaching reading that succeeds equally well with all children. Comparing your child's progress to that of an older brother or sister, or the next-door neighbor may only be discouraging.

Enjoyment of reading is what's most important. Instead of using reading as a bribe, a threat or a punishment, reinforce your child's efforts and willingness with praise. Help the child feel pride in his or her work habits and progress. You might encourage your child to set aside a regular part of the day for reading, but remember that this should be a flexible schedule. If he or she is tired or anxious to play with friends, do not force the child to read, be flexible. Help your child maintain a healthy balance of work, play and rest.

A home atmosphere of eagerness to learn is contagious. Fortunately, it is also simple, natural and fun. If reading is a natural activity for your family, your first-grader is likely to want to join in the fun.

When your family plans special trips or outings, reading and looking at pictures can be made a part of these activities. Show your child how you use a road map or atlas to plan a trip. You might read books together to learn about the place to be visited or to follow up a trip to the circus. This approach will help your child become aware that books and reading are important, normal parts of everyday life, that you value them and that "there's a book about everything."

Make sure that your child has lots of appealing books and magazines. Many good children's books are available in paperback to ease the strain on the family budget. Books are always good gifts for birthdays and other occasions.

Regular visits to the children's room of the public library can become a family affair. The library offers much more than books to take home. Library programs for children--story hour, picture book programs, films--offer valuable reading stimulation and language learning as well as the experience of being in a group.

Reading Games to Play at Home

When your first grader begins to read, the child will probably be very excited about trying out new skills. You can help your child develop confidence as a reader by really being interested and by encouraging the child to read aloud to you from time to time. However, don't force it when he or she doesn't want to. Try to make reading an enjoyable activity for your child--something to look forward to.

Fortunately, it is much easier to find good children's books today than it used to be. They can be borrowed without charge from the public library and the school library. Hundreds of good paperback books for children are now available costing from 35 to 75 cents each, and often sold at school.

Here are several books recommended by the American Library Association that your preschool or first grade child might enjoy:

Jeanne-Marie Counts Her Sheep, by Francoise. This is a good book for practicing counting. Jeanne-Marie is a little girl who counts how many lambs her sheep might have and plans what to buy when she sells their wool.

A for the Ark, by Roger Duvoisin. Each letter of the alphabet stands for one of the colorful animals that line up for the journey in Noah's Ark.

Corduroy, by Don Freeman. A lovable teddy bear, unsold in a department store because one of his buttons is missing, has an exciting adventure and finds a home.

Inch by Inch, by Leo Lionni. In this story an inchworm saves himself from a hungry robin by proving how useful he is for measuring things.

Curious George, by Hans A. Rey. Because of a curiosity, the little jungle monkey George is captured. On his boat trip to America his curiosity gets him into more mischief. This is the first of a series of stories about George.

The Complete Nonsense Book, by Edward Lear. Rhymes, limericks, and nonsense tales fill this book with some of the funniest, silliest things ever written for children.

One Monday Morning, by Uri Shulevitz. During the week a young boy living in a New York tenement makes believe that a king comes to visit him. On Sunday, the boy's real world and his make-believe one blend together as he plays with a deck of cards.

The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins, by Dr. Seuss. Many enchanting books have been written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss. In this one, Bartholomew Cubbins is ordered to take off his hat by the king and when he does he finds out that his hat is magical. Every time Bartholomew takes off his hat, another hat appears on his head.

Josefina February, by Evaline Ness. Josefina is a little Haitian girl who has to choose between a baby burro which she loves, and a pair of real leather shoes for her grandfather.

A Pair of Red Clogs, by Masako Matsuno. A Japanese grandmother tells her grandchildren a story from her childhood about her red clogs, the accident that happened to them, and how she tried to keep her mother from knowing.

Your librarian can add many other books to this list, but remember that not every book appeals to every child. It is important to let children choose what they want to read, even if for a while it is the same book over and over again. Your role is to be a good listener, to praise the child when he or she reads correctly or figures out a hard word, and to help with words that are new or too difficult to sound out on his or her own.

Talk about what you read together. Certain questions will help bring out your child's experience: Do you remember the monkeys we saw at the zoo? Do they remind you of Curious George? What was your favorite part in this story? Don't cross-examine the child, but see if you can get a good discussion going.

The more the child talks and the more he or she becomes involved in books at home, the more likely your child is to become a happy reader at school.

Reducing Psychological Pressures in Learning to Read

Adjusting to a new situation may make anybody tense or a little anxious. As a parent, you should be aware of the pressure your child may be feeling as school starts and he or she begins to learn to read.

First of all, parents can be aware of and try to overcome their own anxieties about their child's beginning school experience. Then the child's fears about a new situation can be more easily handled.

Your child will observe in kindergarten or first grade that some children can do reading tasks better than others. The child knows that people expect him or her to read. Point out and praise your child for the things he or she does well; play down those things which are difficult. Try to reassure the child that inability to do some tasks is not a disgrace. Psychologists tell us that constant criticism of a child's weaknesses will gradually wear down the child's desire to try anything new or different. Every child has some abilities that can be praised. If children are helped to accept themselves, even a slower timetable of learning will not upset them, especially if they know that their parents, too, accept their learning style.

Most parents realize that comparisons between children in the family are not helpful, particularly if the child is having trouble with reading. It is important to remember to treat each child as an individual and not to place the child in competition with brothers or sisters. Neighborhood conversation can also be a trap. If Susy next door is making better progress in reading than your Bobby, remember that there are other areas where Bobby excels, and that children learn at their own pace.

Happiness is most often the result of achieving something that you yourself value. Drive and self-determination are required in reaching such a goal. Parents sometimes organize their children's lives around skills and activities they think would be good for growth--dancing lessons, Little League, Girl Scouts, or whatever. Each of these is a good activity but not every child needs them all.

It is the same way with school. Your child's achievement in some areas will be better than in others. Every child has a set of strengths and weaknesses. Knowing this will help parents to relieve the pressure that comes from over-expectation.

However, if you feel that your child's interests and capacities are not being challenged well enough by the school, talk to the teacher to find out how you can work together to bring out the best in your child.

Talk to your child too. By answering questions about new places, new things, and new ideas, you will point the way to new learning. Discussions about what is seen and experienced on a family trip or on television help produce ideas in sentence form. This is fundamental to preparing your child for "book talk." Help your child also to find answers to questions in books, newspapers, and magazines.

Talk to your child about his or her feelings as well--and watch for behavior that indicates how he or she feels. Children often have a hard time expressing their feelings in words, and they are often secretly afraid to voice negative feelings, about things they don't like, or things that they find hard to do or hard to understand. Parents should learn to by sympathetic listeners and help children learn to place confidence in them.

Most reading problems can be handled successfully at early primary levels once they are recognized. Your child's teacher can tell you about many skill-strengthening activities and games which can be used at home to develop perception, problem-solving, word recognition and other reading skills.

The little boy who is afraid to bring home his report card is a familiar cartoon figure. Many parents and schools have been working together to avoid pressures that result from some types of school reporting. A pat on the head for high marks and a scolding for low marks do very little to help your child with reading or other learning problems. Parents should offer support and encouragement in problem areas. A conference with the child's teacher can help develop the right track for helping their young student.

When parents are unhappy with their own reading habits or skills, they may put extra pressure on their children, hoping to help them avoid the pitfalls their parents encountered. It just doesn't work that way. Instead of adopting the "do as I say, not as I do" method, parents might try to learn along with their child to give him or her encouragement. Even if parents have not regularly enjoyed reading, they should do some reading at a time when the children can see them personally using this basic skill. If they are a poor reader, they might enroll in a reading course at an adult school. Reading together at home may be the most important thing you do to help your child enjoy early school experience.

Adults as Reading Models for Children

Contrary to what many people think, nobody is a "born reader." Behavior is learned, and much of it is learned by imitation. Reading behavior in children is no exception. Attitudes toward reading are learned by children from the adults who surround them from their earliest year.

An adult who loves reading and who is close to a particular child can do much to bring that child and books together in a rewarding, lasting relationship. This adult need not always be a parent. Many readers have known an aunt, a grandmother, a neighbor, a teacher, a librarian or an interested adult friend who has introduced them to books.

The home, however, is most often the major influence on reading attitudes. When a child is surrounded by readers at home, the chances are good the child will become a reader.

A home where people get satisfaction from reading has books everywhere--magazines coming and going regularly. There is a corner somewhere or a snug chair where one can read in comfort, relaxed and quiet, sometimes even alone. Paper and pencils are always available, and they are used for notes and to record thoughts and ideas prompted by reading.

Of course, readers are often found reading° They read about their work, they read about their hobbies, they read for information or just for fun--and their children watch them do it. They go to the library, they may buy paperback books in bus stations to read while on a trip, they buy magazines at the drug store, and they read aloud. They share with others something that strikes them as important or funny. They talk about what they have read and it makes their conversation more interesting. They bring knowledge gained from reading into their work, and it makes their lives more colorful, more creative and more exciting.

Often a child learns from the mother the satisfaction of being a reader. The child senses her delight in making up stories, sometimes drawn from books she read as a little girl. The mother's habit of saying funny things that exactly fit the occasion stimulates a child's interest in reading when the child learns that the mother is quoting from something she read. Her pleasure when her children start to read some words for themselves is a clincher: Reading is important, and every child will be a reader like the other people in the family.

But what about the child who doesn't see reading at home? Suppose the child's parents for one reason or another, can't read, or don't want to read? Suppose books are neither valued nor available in the home?

For the child who missed out on a reading start at home, it is never too late. An atmosphere of reading excitement and interest can fill a classroom, a Cub Scout den, a community center, or any place where there is a reader to serve as an adult model.

Recent writing by young black men like Malcolm X, whose homes could not give them a reading start, show that an adult reading model and a reading atmosphere that come later in life can be a powerful influence in one's life. Claude Brown in Manchild in the Promised Land tells of meeting a middle-aged women, a refugee whose background was very different from his own, when he was a young man in great trouble with his life and with the law. She believed in him, talked about books with him, encouraged him to become a reader, and later, a writer. The message is clear to any adult reader: Find an opportunity to become a reading influence and perhaps change a young life!

All adults can become reading models in some degree. Many a small child seeing a dancer on television or in person, has decided to become a dancer. A fascinating family friend who comes across as a reader, an admired baseball star who likes reading, a favorite babysitter who reads, can have the same influence.

Adults should think about the children they may influence as a reading model and improve their example.

Also, adults who care about reading and the development of readers can try to insure that their community, by the way it sets its priorities, spends its money, provides for reading instruction in its schools and support for its libraries, becomes a reading model for all its children and young people.

Vision, Hearing Coordination and Health in Reading

Learning to read requires more than just willingness and lots of practice. Your child's eyes and ears, in fact the child's whole body, must be ready for reading too.

Many times it is not until our children go off to school that we notice certain things about them. First of all, when first graders are grouped together in a classroom you will notice the differences in their sizes. The tallest kid is likely to be nearly twice the height (and easily twice the weight) of the smallest one. Does this difference in size make a difference in learning ability? Not at all. Size, however, can have an effect on school adjustment.

Some children simply grow more slowly than others. They must be allowed to grow, and learn, at their own pace. Nothing is gained by pushing the child into the race against stronger, more mature children when he or she is not ready to compete with them. If you have a child who seems young for his or her age, talk to the teacher, the school nurse, the social worker, psychologist, or the school principal. They will be able to help you find the best program for your child--one in which the child can be happy and successful.

Sight and hearing are especially important in learning to read. Children with hearing problems are seldom totally deaf. They can manage, sometimes remarkably well, as long as they are in familiar territory.

When such a child gets to school, all of his or her familiar home cues are gone. The hubbub of the classroom blurs everything. The child misses instruction, he or she doesn't know what to do. It's no wonder that the child tries to fake what he or she thinks is expected, laughs at the wrong time, breaks rules which were carefully explained a moment before, all because the sounds did not get through.

Sometimes, the first recognized warning of a hearing loss comes when a child cannot associate sounds with the printed page. The letters are seen clearly enough, but the child cannot hear the sounds which mean "k", "m", or other consonants. The child wonders if it can be that letters have different sounds on different days; reading then becomes a hopeless task.

It is not easy for a parent to detect hearing loss, especially if it is moderate or slight. Suspect a loss, however, if your child is slow to come when called, pays little attention to what you say when his or her back is turned to you, plays the TV or record player louder than the rest of the family, and prefers loud, noisy toys.

Don't wait until the child is in serious trouble with school work. Speak to the child's teacher, and if she is concerned too, arrange for a special examination. These are sometimes offered by the school, by a health department, hearing clinics, and hospitals. Hearing aids can open a new world when they are needed, and there are several other ways of developing and conserving hearing.

Good vision is necessary for good reading. It is not unusual for children with less severe vision problems to get by at home without it being noticed.

A good eye examination before a child starts school is an obvious recommendation. The structure of the eye is still changing at this age. Don't be surprised if you are asked to return in a year or so even when told your child has "essentially normal" vision now.

As a parent you should watch for signs of eyestrain, such as headaches, reluctance to do things that are hard on the eyes, such as reading and certain games. Discuss your observations with the school nurse and your doctor for their suggestions.

Of course, good eating is a necessity for developing strong, healthy energetic little girls and boys. Sending your child off to school with a protein rich breakfast is one of the best ways you can help him or her become a good student. You can get some suggestions for meals with low-cost protein foods and menu planning from the school nurse, the county extension services, and many other sources.

The well-nourished child who gets plenty of rest, and whose vision and hearing are normal or corrected, is well-prepared for school. At this point, the teacher and the school join the parents in sending their child off on the adventure of learning.

Reading Readiness - What Parents Should Know About It

Your first grader may already have had some reading readiness tests in school. The purpose of these tests is to help the teacher discover where a child's strengths and weaknesses lie and where the most help is needed.

There is no assurance that the child who performs well on a test will be a good reader, just as there is no certainty that the child who does poorly will be a poor student. Tests are only one kind of measure, and the teacher will use many other methods to get a whole picture of your child's abilities.

Reading readiness tests may include sections to measure your child's attention span, recognition of letters, ability to tell whether words look or sound alike or different, ability to copy simple figures, or understand word meanings. To do any of these things, he or she must be able to follow directions.

Many tests require a child to listen to a question and pick an answer from several pictured choices. In response to "which animal gives us milk?" he or she is expected to choose the picture of a cow, not the horse or the hen. Another common task is matching. The child may be asked to mark all the horses that look like the first one in the row or to find all the words that are the same as the first word. The person giving the test may say two words, for example, "sand" and "send", and ask the child, "Are they the same or different?" The same question may be asked about two pictures or two letters.

If a child has trouble understanding what he or she is to do in the test, he or she will probably have trouble understanding directions in his or her reading program. If the child cannot pay attention long enough to do the test, he or she probably will not be able to keep up with the teacher in class. Or, if a child has done well on the test, the teacher can find out other things about the child from the results. The teacher may find that the child has a good background in things around the home, but little knowledge of the world outside. Or, the child may be able to tell the difference between pictures better than the difference between words. In this way, reading-readiness tests give the teacher many clues as to what must be done to get the child ready for reading and other learning.

The score your child receives indicates what his or her chances of succeeding in reading are at that particular time. The scores are based on comparisons of how well other children have done on the test. They are only an indication of how the child compares to the average, not a final determiner of his or her fate as a reader. The real job is to see why each child got the rating he or she did and what help the child needs.

Parents can help prepare their children for success in learning to read. A child who is talked with at home, not talked at, learns to respond. The child learns to enjoy using language.

Any activity which helps children handle their language with ease and pleasure aids their future success as a reader. Language games are fun. Most children can get caught up in the spirit of rhyming contests. Have your child start. You give a word that rhymes, and then it's his or her turn again. When the child runs out of real words to use, he or she will throw in some made up for the occasion and get a real kick out of it. You can plan a trip to Turkey - and, of course, to Turkey you can take your top, your tie, and your toaster, but not your doll or your bike. Dolls and dogs and dishes can go to Detroit. Bikes, babies and butter are fine for Boston.

Another important area is the child's ability to think. Here too, there are lots of informal activities which can help children become observers of their world and good thinkers about it. Even the organization of the kitchen cupboards and drawers can be used to help children understand likenesses and differences.

Instead of "Put it there," mother can say "Why do you think it belongs there? What else is in that drawer?" In this way, the child is learning to look, to think about what he or she sees, to compare and to understand.

Parents can help a child to get ready for reading by expecting him or her to be a responsible person. Children need to feel that they are helpful and capable. Don't do for a child what you can help the child to do for himself or herself. Help, so that the child learns how, rather than just to get the job done. It will be harder sometimes than doing it yourself, but well worth it.

Trust your child as someone who can learn, who wants to learn, who wants to be responsible. Encourage his or her curiosity and help the child to satisfy it. Help him or her to understand language and use it with pleasure and confidence. Speak with your child and listen to him or her. If you do, you probably will find that he or she lives up to your expectations and "reading readiness" will be no problem.

Getting Help on Reading Outside of School

Your child's school is primarily responsible for teaching him or her to learn to read. But there are aspects of this learning process for which the school cannot be solely responsible.

As discussed in other articles in this series, helping your child get ready to read begins well before he or she enters school. First, a physical checkup, including vision and hearing examinations, should be made at a clinic or with your own doctor to make sure that your child will not be handicapped in early reading efforts.

Some television programs can be put to good use as reading development helpers. Sesame Street, the Electric Company, Captain Kangaroo, Romper Room, and a number of other programs for young children can give a good deal of experience in words, names, sounds, numbers, reasoning and other prereading skills. Parents can add to the learning by practicing the new concepts at home.

Another effective and ready helper is the children's librarian and library staff who work out of your public library. Story hours and picture book reading sessions help children learn to listen, to respond, to inquire, to relate sounds and letters and to examine pictures for their relationship with words. Best of all, they stimulate the imagination and demonstrate how reading can be a pleasurable and adventuresome experience.

Many children's librarians are skilled at fingerplays and other games that develop word reasoning and problem solving skills. They have at hand films and recordings that stimulate interests and lead to reading. Some librarians produce puppet shows in which stories are acted out and children have a chance to identify with characters they can later read about. For children to have their own library card often stimulates their pride in reading and having books at hand. Help your child get a library card.

The interest and enthusiasm of beginning readers is affected by many people--coaches, sisters and brothers, neighbors, playground aides, club leaders and others. Reading should become as natural a part of the child's all day experience as possible. Reading should not be just an at school activity.

But what of the child who has tried and is failing to learn to read in school? First, check with the school, the child's teacher, the principal or the reading specialist to find out what his or her problems may be and to get advice on how to secure additional help. They may refer you to an out-of-school diagnostic reading center. Many of these are located at colleges; others are private commercial enterprises.

The reading consultant or specialist of the school district should be helpful in referring parents to the one that might meet the need of a particular child. Again, physical causes for difficulty in learning to read should be checked out, and psychological barriers as well. The whole process of finding out what is wrong and what the most effective treatment might be is an important step and one in which parents should willingly cooperate in seeking the answers.

The prescription will of course depend on the diagnosis. It may be that the child is in need of much individual attention, motivation, and practice in reading at his or her own level. Perhaps the child will be referred to an individual, either a professional or volunteer, who will patiently work with him or her in a relaxed, comfortable setting.

Thousands of people have volunteered to assist children in learning to read either under the direction of the school system or under the sponsorship of a service organization. Your principal or librarian may know of such people.

Perhaps on the other hand, the child's reading problems are such that they require intensive work with a highly skilled reading professional. In this case, either a university reading center or a reputable private tutor or remedial service should be sought.

The kind of help to seek depends on the kind of help really needed. Often, parents find that the kind of enriched reading environment, reinforcement and interest that they alone can provide right at home is what their child needs most.

To neglect a child having difficulty in reading only makes his or her problem worse. Increased understanding, patience, attention and encouragement are needed consistent with a competent diagnosis of the child's difficulty. Often help outside of school will tilt the scale favorably.

A Primer for Parents on Reading Methods

Of the many methods of teaching reading to children, no one way is the best. Children learn best when methods are fitted to their own special needs and interests.

The methods used to teach reading in your school will depend upon school policy, materials available, and how the teachers have been trained. Following are some of the current methods used to teach reading.

1. In the basal reading approach children are given a series of several books in kindergarten and first grade. Some series now have games, filmstips, and records to complement the books. Many have workbooks which enable the pupils to practice skills introduced by the teacher.

The basal reading series provides for a flexible teaching program. The teacher can tie in other subjects--science, social studies, literature--for practicing and reinforcing reading skills. The teacher supervises the pupil as he or she completes their workbook. These drills help find the areas in which the teacher can most help the child.

2. The language-experience approach relates listening, speaking, reading and writing to the child's everyday experiences. Early in the program the whole class dictates a story about an experience they have had together. Later, children work in small groups or on their own. Teachers, teachers' aides and older children write down the children's stories so they can read and reread them to learn basic reading skills. Skills are taught as they are needed to read the stories dictated, so the child sees the "pay off" for learning them immediately.

With this approach the children's interest is usually very high because they use their own experiences for reading material. They learn that what is said can be written, what is written can be read, and what is read can be heard by others.

3. Individualized reading programs are geared to the special needs of each child. In this method teachers usually use basal readers or the language-experience approach to teach basic reading skills. Then children may select the books they want to read aloud to a friend or to themselves. Each week the teacher meets with the child to discuss the book he or she is reading. The teacher listens to the child read, and makes a record of his or her progress and problems. If a child needs more help he or she will work with the teacher more often. This approach allows a variety of methods to be used according to each child's needs.

4. In programmed instruction children work with a workbook or a computer at their own rate of progress. There is a lot of repetition and an emphasis on the child helping himself or herself. The child must work drills correctly in each step of the program before he or she moves to the next, and is told immediately if his or her answer is right or wrong. Learning is therefore reinforced and the pace is set by the child, understanding and correcting his or her own mistakes.

Although teachers in the program can spend more time with small groups and individuals, programmed instruction at present deals with only a few of the skills needed for learning to read.

5. The word in color approach uses the relationship between sounds and symbols. Forty-seven different colors on 21 drill charts represent the different sounds of English. Each sound is learned separately and is then blended with others to make words. For this method to work, pupils must be able to distinguish colors as well as to hear sound differences. After pupils learn most of the basic sounds, they begin to work with a story reader.

6. The Initial Teaching Alphabet is a set of 44 characters. Twenty-four are from the English alphabet (x and q are missing). Fourteen are combinations of letters, and the remaining ones are invented symbols that represent sounds of the same letter.

There are many different ways of using ITA. Stories and basal readers are often used in the lessons. The children are encouraged to read a lot and write down their experiences. A gradual switch to using the regular alphabet usually takes place at the end of the first or beginning of second grade. This does not usually present a problem since 24 of the ITA characters are the same as the letters of the standard alphabet.

To summarize, no one method has been shown to be the best way to teach reading. Often different methods may be combined to provide a total reading program. Whatever method or combination of methods is used, the most important factor is a well-trained teacher who is familiar with the needs of the children in his or her class and who uses a variety of methods to keep them interested in reading.

What Can Communities Do To Improve Reading Programs?

Being able to read is a necessity in the world today. This is why we are so concerned about how our children learn to read in the early years of school. Yet, according to a recent Harris poll sponsored by the National Reading Center, there are 18.5 million people in the United States today who cannot read well enough to fill out an application for a driver's license or a Social Security form. Many more do not have sufficient reading skills to get a better job or to make real progress in school. What is your community doing to help its people learn to read?

In order to provide everyone in the United States the right to read, communities must take stock and evaluate what they are doing now for reading. Perhaps the PTA, the League of Women Voters or a specially formed Reading Resources Council in your community could get the ball rolling and take a community self-inventory.

The survey should ask such questions as: What methods of reading instruction are being used in the public schools? How successful are they? Does the public library promote programs that take reading to young people and not just wait for the young people to come to them? What are our pre-school and day-care programs doing to help promote love of reading, and readiness to learn reading skills? Do business and industry sponsor reading programs for their employees or for the whole community? What are churches, synagogues and service groups doing to stimulate greater local reading efforts? How much television time is given to reading teaching programs?

Once you have found the answers to these questions, the whole community can begin together to make better reading skills for its citizens a community effort.

Each community has many resources to develop important reading improvement services. At times these must be searched out, discovered and carefully developed. The greatest resource of any community is not its building, its industries, or its monuments, but its people. With wise involvement of people, giant steps toward developing new reading services can be made.

For instance, the use of volunteers, who have received special training, to help in community reading programs is a real possibility. In recent years schools have used more and more trained volunteers in classrooms, as tutors, in the libraries. When volunteers help in the school, teachers, librarians, and other specialists gain more free time to work with children who need extra help. Trained volunteers also can provide knowledgable support for reading programs located in church day-care centers, pre-school programs, and tutoring centers.

A good source of volunteer help is junior high and high school students. These students usually have a great deal of optimism and a strong desire to help, and they relate very well to young children.

Retired people who have much free time as well as a storehouse of information and experience also make excellent volunteers. Many of them welcome the chance to devote their energies to a worthwhile cause.

Church and service groups often can be persuaded to coordinate a volunteer program. They also have the facilities to provide a meeting place for volunteer tutors and those who need help with reading. Teachers, librarians, and reading specialists can be asked to help train the volunteers in reading teaching methods.

In connection with the community reading effort, television should play a central role. Under the regulations of the Federal Communications Commission, all television stations are obliged to provide public service and educational programs. People in your community can be mustered to urge the local stations to use this time for reading education.

Private industry, too, is interested in developing reading skills. Employees with good reading skills are more valuable on the job. Don't be hesitant to approach the businesses in your community. Many companies already have reading programs of their own. Others may be willing to provide financial support, manpower, or a meeting place for a community sponsored program.

Parents also must take an interest in and support their schools' reading programs. School programs should be giving your children the desire to read as well as the necessary skills.

Parents who really want to help the reading effort should not look for who is to blame for errors or inactivity in their community, but should find out what they can do to work for improvement. Only through community action at the local level can reading opportunity be made wide open, available to all.